

STEPHANIE NEUMAN

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As Congress and the media continue to investigate reports of indirect and covert military assistance to Iran and the Contras, one wonders why this particular incident and method of transfer has caused so much surprised dismay. There is nothing new about states overtly trying to win friends and influence with arms.

During the nuclear age, governments have turned to conventional arms sales as a political instrument with increasing frequency as other more violent means of persuasion have become less acceptable and more dangerous.

Neither is the secret transfer of arms and money by governments using indirect conduits a new development. U.S. practices, in particular, have been regularly documented in the press, and even the indirect, covert supply of the Contras received extensive media attention several years ago. In fact, the arming and training of combatants by the United States, using varied, often indirect donors has become the dominant mode of military assistance to combatants, particularly those who, from the U.S. perspective, are fighting politically sensitive, low-intensity wars.

A recent example, in addition to Central America, is the war in Afghanistan. According to published accounts, 12 days after the Soviet troops crossed the Afghan border in 1979, the CIA had outlined its plans for indirect arms transfers to

the rebels. By mid-1981, the CIA was coordinating a complex, far-flung program involving five indirect sources of aid and between \$20 million and \$50 million a year in equipment and training for the Afghans. Reportedly the United States provides financial assistance, arranges the purchase of some weapons on the international arms market, and is the operation's primary planner and coordinator.

Saudi Arabia has undertaken the other major financing role, while Egypt offers training for the guerrillas and serves as a major supplier of Soviet-origin weapons along with the People's Republic of China.

It has been reported that Pakistan, in part in exchange for a \$3.2 billion U.S. aid package (which has been passed by Congress), has permitted the weapons to move across its 1,400-mile border with Afghanistan and has tolerated training camps within its territory.

What's new about covert arms deals?

Since 1981, the amount of aid and the sophistication of the weapons delivered has risen considerably.

In Central America, too, a flood of press items have described similar U.S. behavior. As early as 1983, Israel is said to have supplemented U.S. assistance to the region. By 1984, the media was reporting that Israeli assistance to the Contras alone totaled several million dollars in weapons and financing and there was speculation that the United States was repaying Israel for this

"unofficial aid" in its military and economic aid package to Israel, again, passed by Congress. According to one account, "at the request of the United States," Israel sold weapons captured from the Palestine Liberation Organization as well as some Western-origin systems to Honduras for use by the Contras.

Other countries heavily dependent upon the United States for economic and military support, such as Brazil, Venezuela, and Argentina are also said to be indirectly sending military equipment to the Contras. From 1982-84 alone, Argentina reportedly sold at least \$10 million worth of arms to Honduras for shipment to the Contras. Even Brazil is alleged to have provided indirect aid to the Contras, and Saudi Arabia and Brunei are said to have contributed substantial amounts of money. Honduras, in exchange for allowing U.S.-sponsored aid to the Contras to pass through its territory, has pressured successfully for increased U.S. military and economic aid — again agreed to by Congress.

The funding activities of private organizations with regard to the Contras also have received considerable press coverage. Since 1983, these activities were said to include the donation of money to the Nicaraguan rebels by private U.S. citizens and corporations and the shipment of military equipment to the Contras and El Salvador's forces by an Alabama-based veterans organization called Civilian Military Assistance. These organizations, along with the other indirect suppliers, were said to be "replacing the United States as a key source of aid."

This type of transfer is not limited to the United States. In fact, these indirect transfers have served an important function for both superpowers. Similar patterns of military assistance, for instance, characterize Soviet aid to Nicaragua's Sandinista government.

For the United States and the U.S.S.R., the stakes of war have grown dangerously high, and although both want to protect their regional interests, neither wants to become involved in a regional conflict that may lead to a wider, more destructive superpower confrontation.

Consequently, in regional conflicts the availability of friends and allies willing to proffer materiel, training, or financial assistance provides the superpowers the means to conduct their global competition less visibly, and from their point of view, more safely.

Covert arms transfers, then, have become an important, highly publicized political-military instrument used by the superpowers — and in the United States by Democratic and Republican administrations — to influence international events and achieve desired national ends.

Congress knows this and the press knows it. So what's new is not covert military aid to the Contras or other combatants — but the upcoming elections in 1988. It is important for the American public to know this, too, and to keep the recent "scandal" in perspective.

Both Democrats and Republicans have much to answer for — and it is still too early to tell whether they deserve blame or approbation for these policies.